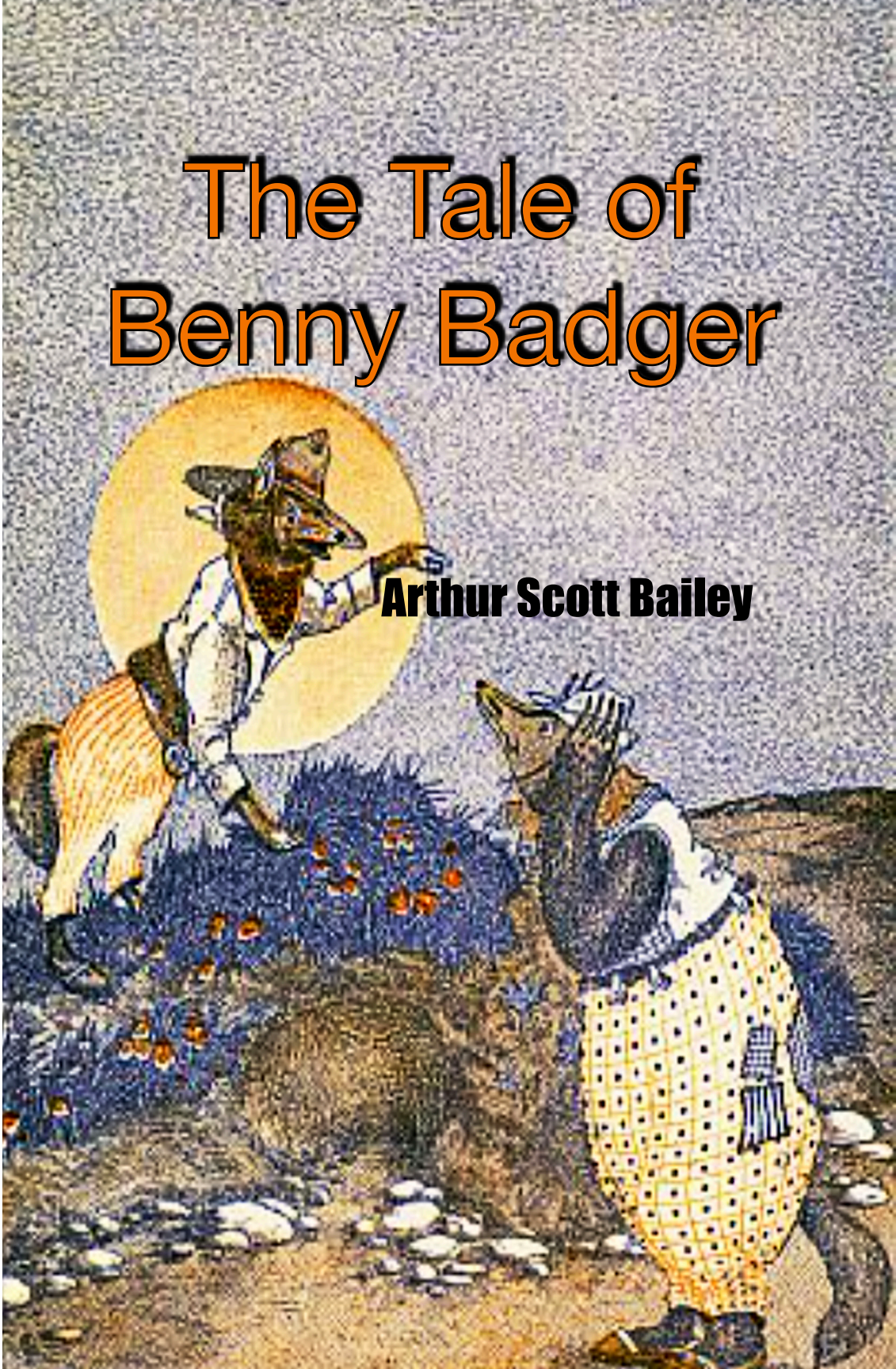
The Tale of Benny Badger

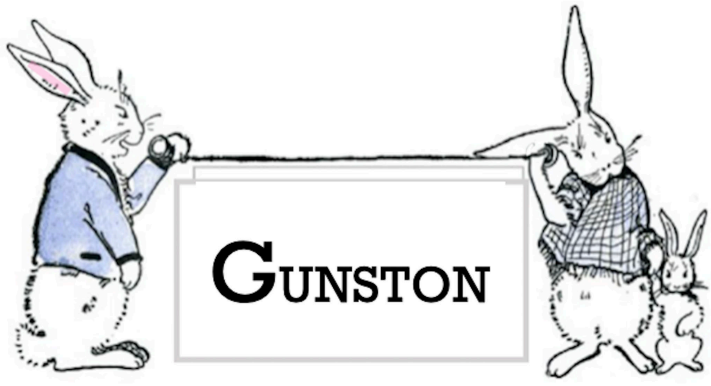


Arthur Scott Bailey

The Tale of Benny Badger

By Arthur Scott Bailey
Illustrated by Harry L. Smith

Sleepy-Time Tales



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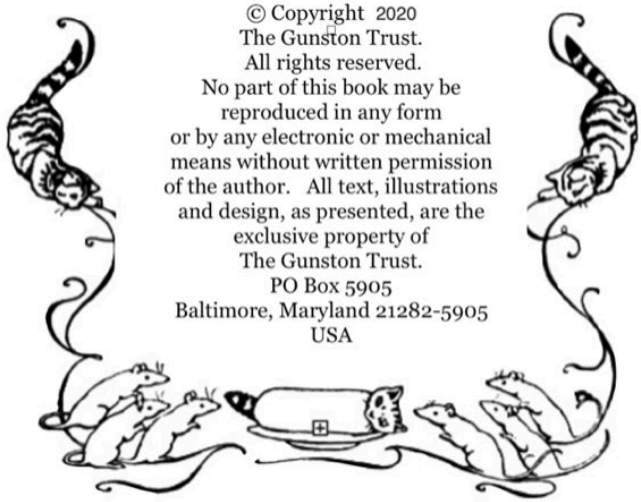

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Gunston & The Book Bunnies

The Tale of Benny Badger

I.
A GREAT DIGGER

Of course, Benny Badger had the best of reasons for living on the high, dry plains. There he had for neighbors plenty of ground squirrels and prairie dogs. And it is likely that he enjoyed their company much more than they did his.

If anyone had asked them, those little wild people would no doubt have confessed that they wished Benny Badger was somewhere else. But their wishes meant nothing to Benny—if he knew anything of them. Although he couldn't help noticing that his small neighbors hurried into their homes whenever they caught sight of him, Benny never took the hint and went away. On the contrary, when he spied a prairie

dog or a ground squirrel disappearing into his burrow Benny was more than ready to go right in after him.

Now, the tunnels that led to the houses of those smaller folk were too small to admit anybody as bulky as Benny Badger. But that difficulty never hindered Benny. Digging was the easiest thing he did. He had a powerful body, short, stout legs, and big feet, which bore long, strong claws. And when he started to dig his way into somebody else's home he certainly did make the dirt fly.

He was so fond of digging that he even dug countless holes of his own, just for the fun it gave him —so far as anybody could find out. And if he had only left other folk's holes alone some of his neighbors would not have objected to his favorite sport. For more than one fox and coyote had been known to make his home in a hole dug by Benny Badger. And, though they never took the trouble to thank him for saving them work, they often chuckled about his odd way of having fun, and remarked among themselves that Benny must be a stupid fellow.

If they really thought that, they made a great mistake. To be sure, at anything except digging he was slow and awkward. He was too heavy and squat to be spry on his feet—to chase and catch his more nimble neighbors. But no one that knew much about Benny Badger would have said that his wits were dull. They were sharp. And so, too, were his teeth, which he never hesitated to use in a fight.

Left alone, Benny Badger—when he wasn't too hungry—was a peaceable person. But if a dog ever tried to worry him Benny had a most unpleasant way of seizing his annoyer with his powerful jaws and holding the poor creature as if he never intended to let him go.

Cornered, Benny knew no such thing as fear. He had the heart of a lion, and jaws like a steel trap. And no wise dog ever let Benny get a good, firm grip on him.

Usually no one saw Benny Badger except at night. He seldom left his den in the daytime except to sun himself. And even then not many noticed him. Though he did not hide when anyone surprised him

while taking a sun-bath, he had a trick of lying flat in the grass without moving. And it took a sharp eye to spy him when he lay low in that fashion.

Curled up asleep, with his long fur on end, he looked too comfortable to disturb. At least, that was what the ground squirrels thought. And if one of those busy little fellows ever paused to stare curiously at Benny when he was having a nap in the warm sunshine, Benny Badger had only to awake and turn his head toward the onlooker to make him scamper for home as fast as he could go.

It was not Benny's face, either, that frightened the ground squirrels away, though everybody had to admit that he had a queer one. A black patch spread over his eyes and ran like the point of a V down his nose. For the most part, however, he was of a grayish color, with still more black running in streaks across his back. Underneath he was a—yes! a dirty white color. But then, one must remember that he was forever digging in the dirt; and there was very little water where he lived. Anyhow, he was particular

enough about one thing: his long hair was always carefully parted in the middle from his head to his tail.

And certainly that ought to show that he tried to keep himself looking neat.

II
HUNTING FOR SOMETHING

It was a pleasant summer's night. Anyone would have supposed that it was just the sort of weather that Benny Badger might have chosen for digging holes. But he must have thought that he had dug enough holes for the time being. He wandered about as if he had lost a hole somewhere and couldn't find it. And whenever he spied a hole made by one of his smaller neighbors he stopped and looked at it closely.

But none of them seemed to be the one he was looking for. At least, Benny examined a good many holes, and then passed on again, before he came to one at last that was different from all the rest. If you could have seen the look of pleasure on Benny's odd face when he caught sight of this particular hole you

Gunston & The Book Bunnies

Mr. Ground Squirrel Escapes from Benny

The Tale of Benny Badger

would have known at once that his search had come to an end.

Now, as a matter of fact, Benny Badger had not lost a hole. His strange behavior did not mean that. It meant that he was searching for a fresh hole, which some ground squirrel had dug so short a time before that there couldn't be much doubt that the small owner was then living in it.

To be sure, Benny might have dug his way to the furthest end of each hole that he found that night. And doubtless he would have enjoyed such a pastime. But as for finding a plump ground squirrel at the end of every tunnel—ah! that would have been a different matter. No such pleasant sight would have greeted Benny's eyes. And on this evening he wanted to find some such reward when his digging came to an end. He knew as well as he knew anything in the world that newly scattered earth never lay strewn about the doorway of an old hole.

And that was the reason he passed by so many holes with hardly more than a swift glance.But when at length he found what he had been looking for—a hole

with fresh brown dirt scattered carelessly around it—Benny Badger showed by every one of his actions that he didn't intend to move on until he had burrowed to the very end of it.

A broad smile lighted up his queerly marked face. At least, he opened his mouth and showed a good many of his teeth. And a bright, eager glint came into his eyes; whereas they had had a somewhat wistful look before, as if their owner might have been hungry, and didn't exactly know where he was going to find a meal.

Then Benny Badger looked all around, to see whether anybody might be watching him. But there was no one in sight. And if there had been, Benny Badger would have done no more than tell him that he had better run along about his business, because it would do him no good to wait—none at all.

And if the onlooker had happened to come so near as to bother Benny in what he intended to do, that unfortunate person might have wished that he had taken a bit of friendly advice in time, and made himself scarce.

But, of course, Benny Badger was not so foolish as to give any such warning, for there was no one there to hear it.

III
NO ONE AT HOME

Since there seemed to be nobody lurking in the shadows around him, and watching him, Benny Badger turned to the ground squirrel's hole and began to dig. How he did make the dirt fly! He scooped it up with his big feet and flung it back in a shower, not caring in the least where it fell. For he was interested not in what lay behind, but before him.

In almost less time than it takes to tell about it, Benny Badger had made the entrance of the tunnel so big that it swallowed his head and shoulders.

Now, when some people do anything they are forever stopping to see how much they have finished, as if they hated to work and wished that they didn't have to. But Benny Badger was not like them. He loved to dig. And instead of wishing that it wasn't far to the ground squirrel's chamber he kept hoping that it was a good, long tunnel, so that he might have plenty of fun digging his way to the end of it.

He didn't pause to look back at the pile of dirt he had thrown behind him. In fact, he didn't stop for anything—not even to take a long breath—until he noticed a sound that made him pause and listen for a few moments.

It was a yapping, growling noise that caught Benny Badger's ear—a noise that changed, while he listened, to a howl, and then suddenly ended as it had begun.

That call, coming as it did out of the night, would have frightened many people. Not knowing just what it was, they might have thought it sounded like the cry of a wolf. But Benny Badger showed not the least sign of fear. On the contrary, he seemed almost angry with himself because he had stopped even for a few moments to listen.

"Oh, fudge!" he said—or something a good deal like that. "It's nothing but a Coyote." And then he went to digging faster than ever, to make up for lost time.

He hadn't been working long after that when Mr. Coyote's call made him back out of the hole and listen once more.

"Shucks!" said Benny Badger—or something like that, anyhow. "He's coming this way."

Anyone could have seen that Benny Badger was not pleased. But he continued his work just the same. And he made the dirt fly even more furiously than before, because he wanted to reach the end of the ground squirrel's tunnel before Mr. Coyote arrived on the scene.

It happened that Mr. Coyote was stalking slowly across the country in the moonlight, headed for no place in particular. So Benny Badger had time to burrow his way to the ground squirrel's bedroom without being interrupted.

And then Benny met with a sad disappointment. The owner of the burrow was not at home! Benny knew that he could not have been gone long, because the bed of dried grasses was still warm.

It was plain that Mr. Ground Squirrel had awakened and heard the sound of Benny

Badger's digging. And there was no doubt that he had sprung up in a hurry and rushed out of his back door, while Benny made his way through the front one.

Benny Badger tried to console himself with the thought that anyhow he had had the fun of digging. But he was very hungry. And there was no supper in sight anywhere.

He was just about to renew his search for fresh ground squirrels' holes, when who should appear but Mr. Coyote himself, with a knowing smile upon his narrow face.

IV
MR. COYOTE SINGS

Benny Badger was not at all glad to see Mr. Coyote. And after Benny's ill luck, the smile upon Mr. Coyote's face made the disappointed digger feel almost peevish.

"What a beautiful evening it is!" said Mr. Coyote. "And what a fine night for digging!"

Benny Badger glared at the newcomer, making no attempt to hide his displeasure at seeing him.

"I don't notice you doing any digging," he remarked with a sneer. He had no use for Mr. Coyote, and he did not mind letting that tricky fellow know it, either.

But Mr. Coyote was not one to take a hint. If he knew he wasn't wanted anywhere, it never made the slightest difference to him. And when Benny as much as told him that he was too lazy to dig a hole, Mr. Coyote did not lose his temper even for a moment.

"No—I seldom dig," he replied. "I don't want to spoil your fun. If I went to work and dug and dug anywhere and everywhere there'd soon be nothing but holes, no matter where you went. You'd have no place to dig a hole yourself. And then you'd be pretty unhappy."

Benny Badger hadn't thought of that. And he didn't know just what to say, because if Mr. Coyote meant what he said, Benny wanted to say something pleasant; and if Mr. Coyote was only joking, Benny wanted to say something disagreeable. But before Benny had made up his mind how to reply to Mr. Coyote's remark, his noisy friend began talking again.

"Besides," Mr. Coyote added, "I haven't time for digging, because I have to practice singing.... If you don't mind, I'll practice a song right now."

And without waiting to find out whether Benny Badger did mind or not, Mr. Coyote began singing in the harshest of voices:

The Coyote's Song

When Mr. Sun has gone to bed
to seek his needed rest,
And Mr. Moon has climbed the skies
to flood the plains with light,
And Mrs. Wind blows softly
from the foothills in the west,
I love to sing my yip-ky, oodle-doodle in the night.
When morning comes I hurry home,
to take my daily nap;
But when the spooky shadows fall
and all the world is dark,
Oh! then's the time I'm wide awake
and ready with a yap,
A happy, yappy yip-ky,
oodle-doodle, and a bark.
And none that hears my lovely voice, when startled from a dream,

Will soon forget how I begin
my chorus with a growl;
Nor how I quickly run the scale,
to end it with a scream,
A happy, yappy yip-ky, oodle-doodle,
and a howl.

Let them that do not know my ways cry fearfully for help,
And shake and shiver when they hear my loud and lusty call;
While I will merely jeer at them with something like a yelp,
A happy, yappy yip-ky, oodle-doodle, and a squall.
And now I will explain to you—perhaps you've guessed before
The lesson that I always strive with might and main to teach—
If you would frighten timid folk, alarm them with a roar,

A happy, yappy, yip-ky, oodle-doodle, and a screech.

"How do you like that?" Mr. Coyote asked with a grin, when he had finished.

"Not very well!" said Benny Badger.

Mr. Coyote looked just the least bit crestfallen.

"Perhaps I haven't practiced the song as much as I should," he remarked. And thereupon he started to sing it again.

But Benny Badger stopped him quickly.

"Don't!" he cried. And he held his paws, dirty as they were, over his ears, as if he couldn't bear to hear that song another time.

Mr. Coyote smiled agreeably.

"I see," he said easily. "You don't enjoy music as I do. But I believe we have one taste in common."

"What's that?" Benny Badger asked him; for in spite of his paws being over his ears, he heard what Mr. Coyote said. "What's that?"

"Ground Squirrels!" Mr. Coyote replied, licking his chops as he spoke.

V
SPEAKING OF GROUND SQUIRRELS

Benny Badger stared none too pleasantly at Mr. Coyote. He didn't like his visitor. And he wished Mr. Coyote would go away.

But Mr. Coyote seemed to be in no hurry to leave. On the contrary, he appeared to have plenty of time to spare. And if he noticed the frown on Benny Badger's face, he certainly acted as if it were the most agreeable of smiles.

"We were speaking of Ground Squirrels——" he began with a smirk.

Benny Badger interrupted him quickly.

"We were not!" he snapped. "I haven't mentioned Ground Squirrels," he growled.

Mr. Coyote fell back a few steps.

"Well, I know you're interested in them, anyhow," he continued, trying to act as if he were quite unruffled by Benny's rudeness. "You can't deny that, for unless I'm mistaken, you've just caught one here." And his bright eyes twinkled, for he thought he "had" Benny Badger there, and it would be of no use for Benny to deny it.

"You are mistaken," Benny Badger grunted.

At that Mr. Coyote shot a swift look at him. Was that a shadow of disappointment about Benny's mouth?

"Did he get away from you?" Mr. Coyote inquired.

Benny Badger had to admit that that was exactly the case. He explained how he had found the Ground Squirrel's bed warm, but empty, when he reached the snug bedroom.

"I don't see how it happened," he told Mr. Coyote mournfully.

That crafty fellow gave a short laugh. He rather believed he knew where the trouble lay. And he said to

himself—under his breath—that Benny Badger was even more stupid than he had supposed.

"Did you keep an eye on the Ground Squirrel's back door?" he inquired. And he was so amused by something or other that he began to giggle.

Benny Badger was afraid that Mr. Coyote was going to burst into song again. And he couldn't help shuddering.

"Are you going to sing?" he asked hastily.

"I hadn't intended to," Mr. Coyote answered. "But of course if you want me to——"

"No! no!" Benny cried. "Please don't!"

"Very well!" his musical friend replied. And then he returned to his question. "What about the back door? Did you watch it carefully?" he inquired.

"How could I?" Benny demanded, with a snort of anger. "I can't dig away at a Ground Squirrel's hole, with my head buried in it, and watch his back door at the same time. If I stopped digging, and went around to the back door, he'd be almost sure to run out through the front one. So I'd be no better off. In fact, I'd

be worse off; for I'd lose not only the Ground Squirrel, but the fun of digging, too."

Mr. Coyote turned his head away and smiled a wide, wide smile. It was some moments before he could trust himself to speak without laughing right in Benny Badger's face.

"It's plain," he said at last, "that you need help. So I'm coming here every night to assist you in the business of catching Ground Squirrels."

VI
STRANGE PARTNERS

Mr. Coyote's plan for helping him catch Ground Squirrels did not please Benny Badger in the least. Up to that time he had always had fair luck hunting alone. And he said as much to Mr. Coyote, in none too friendly a tone.

Though Benny thought he had made his feelings plain enough, it seemed as if Mr. Coyote couldn't take a hint. So far was he from guessing that Benny did not care for his scheme that he even suggested that it might be a good idea if he brought a half dozen of his brothers along with him. He was very cheerful about the whole affair—was Mr. Coyote. Indeed, he appeared quite ready to arrange Benny Badger's business, without ever a "By your leave," or "If you don't mind."

But Benny Badger was no person to stand quietly by and let a scamp like Mr. Coyote spoil his whole life. He shook his head in a most obstinate fashion, giving his visitor fair warning not to go too far.

"For goodness' sake, don't bring any of your brothers here!" Benny Badger shouted. "I never could stand a crowd of your relations. It's bad enough to have to listen to your six brothers when they're half a mile away."

Mr. Coyote took no offense at that remark.

"Very well!" he replied. "No doubt they'd want to sing if they came here to help you. And certainly their singing would interfere with your digging—for of course you'd want to stop and listen to it."

Benny Badger's only comment sounded somewhat like "Humph!" But Mr. Coyote must have thought that Benny agreed with him. At least, he nodded his head. And he went on to say that he would be glad to help Benny alone, without calling on his brothers.

Benny Badger made no further objection. To be sure, having one of the Coyote family with him every

night would be bad enough. But it was so much better than having seven of them that he began to feel almost pleased. Perhaps he was lucky, after all! And besides, he thought that when Mr. Coyote came to help him catch Ground Squirrels that good-for-nothing scamp would soon tire of digging.

And then a terrible uproar broke the silence. It sounded as if a hundred wolves—or maybe a thousand dogs—had fallen to quarreling a mile away, growling and howling in the distance.

As soon as he heard the noise Mr. Coyote pricked up his ears and sprang to his feet. "I must leave you now," he said. "There are my six brothers! They're going to have a sing. And I promised that I'd join them.... Don't forget!" he added, as he flung a sly smile in Benny Badger's direction. "I'll be here soon after dark to-morrow night."

And the next moment he was gone.

Benny Badger stood and watched him as he loped off across the moonlit plain. And not long afterward a terrific racket—twice as loud as the one

before—made Benny bury his head in the place where he had been digging.

"Mr. Coyote has joined his six brothers," he said to himself.

VII
MR. COYOTE REMEMBERS

The next evening, just at dusk, Benny Badger left his den and set forth on his usual nightly ramble. By way of exercise, and for the sake of the fun it gave him, and to improve his appetite, he dug a few holes. And by the time it was dark he was hungry as a bear and ready to look once more for fresh holes made by Ground Squirrels.

He had decided not to wait for Mr. Coyote to join him, before beginning his search. And he even hoped that Mr. Coyote had forgotten all about his promise to meet him and help him hunt.

But Benny Badger was to have no such good fortune as that. It was not long before he heard Mr. Coyote calling to him. And though he made no answer, thinking that Mr. Coyote might not be able to find him,

in a few minutes that sharp-faced gentleman came bounding up at top speed.

"Here I am!" he cried, as soon as he spied Benny Badger. "I see you started out without waiting for me. You didn't think I'd disappoint you, did you?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't," Benny answered—a remark that Mr. Coyote seemed not to understand. For a moment or two he looked somewhat puzzled. But he decided, evidently, that Benny meant to be pleasant, but didn't know how to be.

"Now, then," Mr. Coyote said, while Benny Badger shuddered at his harsh voice, "now then, where do you think we'd better look for a hole?"

"For pity's sake, don't howl so loud!" Benny Badger besought him. "You'll waken all the Ground Squirrels in the neighborhood if you're so noisy."

"Pardon me!" said Mr. Coyote very meekly, lowering his voice, but promptly raising it again. "Do you know of any fresh holes around here?"

Benny Badger said that he didn't.

"Then you'd better hunt for one at once," Mr. Coyote declared, sitting down on his haunches as if he

hadn't the slightest notion of doing any of the searching himself. "While you're looking, I'll sing a little song," he announced.

"You needn't trouble yourself to do that," Benny Badger told him hastily.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all, I assure you," Mr. Coyote replied.

"Well—don't you do it, anyhow," Benny warned him. "If you sing, you'll spoil everything, because I shall not be able to look for any hole."

"I see," said Mr. Coyote, looking more than pleased. "You'd want to stop and listen to me, of course."

"It's not that," Benny Badger corrected him. "I may as well tell you that I don't like your songs at all."

"I have some that you've never heard," Mr. Coyote explained.

"I don't want to hear them," Benny Badger informed him. "I may as well tell you that your songs drive me almost crazy."

It would not have been surprising if Mr. Coyote had flown into a great rage. But he did not. Instead, he

pretended to wipe a tear away from each of his eyes.

"It's a pity"—he sighed—"it's a pity that you don't understand music. Some time I will teach you to sing—with the help of my six brothers."

Benny Badger showed no joy over that promise. But he felt relieved when Mr. Coyote agreed not to sing that night. And then Benny set out alone to look for a fresh Ground Squirrel's hole, leaving Mr. Coyote with his face hidden in his pocket-handkerchief.

VIII
A WATCHER AND A WORKER

Benny Badger searched for some time before he found a Ground Squirrel's hole that looked as if its owner had finished it only a day or two before.

The place was so far from the spot where Benny had left Mr. Coyote that he did not believe he could call loudly enough for his helper to hear him.

For a few moments Benny thought that perhaps he ought to go back and tell Mr. Coyote that he had found a good place to dig. But he soon changed his mind.

"I'll just begin digging and say nothing," he remarked to himself. "And perhaps I can catch this Ground Squirrel without Mr. Coyote's help."

So he set to work. But he hadn't dug very far into the hole before he heard Mr. Coyote's voice close

behind him. That sly fellow had been following him all the time.

"I hope the owner of this hole is at home," Mr. Coyote ventured.

At those words Benny Badger backed out of the hole and turned around.

"I'll let you dig a while," he said generously.
Mr. Coyote thanked him. But he answered that he couldn't think of accepting Benny Badger's offer.

"I know you would be disappointed not to do the digging yourself," he explained. "And besides, you're a better digger than I am. So I'll let you tear this tunnel open, while I go around to the back door and watch.... You know, I have a very sharp eye."

Benny Badger looked at Mr. Coyote narrowly. It occurred to him that both Mr. Coyote's eyes were very sharp. Furthermore, his nose was sharp, too. And so were his teeth. Yes! on the whole, Benny thought, Mr. Coyote appeared to be an exceedingly sharp person.

"Very well!" Benny told him at last. "I'll do the digging, gladly—for I need the practice that it will give

me. You see, I haven't dug more than a half-dozen holes to-night."

Then he thrust his head into the opening he had already made. But before he had begun to throw more dirt behind him he pulled his head out again and called to his helper, who had moved a few steps away.

"If the Ground Squirrel comes out through his back door, please call me at once!" he cried.

Mr. Coyote nodded his head over his shoulder and smiled.

"I will," he agreed. "And I'll ask you not to forget to dig hard, because you know I'll be watching hard. And it wouldn't be fair for one of us to do less work than the other."

Benny Badger replied that in his opinion Mr. Coyote's statement was in every way reasonable.
And then he began to dig.

Benny would have made better time had he not stopped every few minutes to listen; for he did not want to miss hearing Mr. Coyote's call.

But his ears caught nothing more than a chuckle from the spot where Mr. Coyote sat on his haunches in the grass, watching.

"I can stand his chuckling—if only he won't sing!" Benny said to himself.

IX
A CARELESS HELPER

Stopping often to listen, Benny Badger did not reach the Ground Squirrel's chamber half as quickly as he could have had he done nothing but dig.

And when he thrust his nose into the underground bedroom he found nobody at home. The Ground Squirrel had fled, leaving his nest so warm that Benny Badger knew he could not have been gone long. Benny turned away. But he was not so disappointed as he might have been, for he remembered that Mr. Coyote was watching the back door. And certainly no Ground Squirrel could escape his sharp eyes.

Hurrying as fast as his short legs would carry him, Benny joined Mr. Coyote, who still sat comfortably on his haunches.

To Benny's surprise, his helper's eyes were closed, instead of being fixed on the Ground Squirrel's back door.

"Have you seen anything of the Ground Squirrel?" Benny demanded anxiously.

Mr. Coyote started, and opened his eyes.

"Somebody came out a few moments ago," he replied. "But he disappeared in no time."

"That's too bad!" Benny Badger wailed. "He got away!"

"Are you sure?" Mr. Coyote inquired.

"Why, yes!" Benny cried. "It's as plain as the nose on your face."

"I won't dispute you," said Mr. Coyote.

"You'd better not!" Benny Badger snapped. "You have been very careless. I don't believe you watched carefully enough. When I came up just now you had your eyes shut."

"I won't dispute you," said Mr. Coyote again. He was most polite—so polite, in fact, that Benny Badger was ashamed to appear rude or quarrelsome.

But Benny couldn't help being disappointed over losing the Ground Squirrel. And when, after he had dug to the end of three more tunnels that night, the same accident happened three times more, he decided that something would have to be done. It was clear that Mr. Coyote's eyes were not sharp enough. He was not nearly so helpful as Benny had expected him to be.

"We'll have to change about," Benny announced at last. "You must dig, while I watch."

But Mr. Coyote promptly made a number of objections to that plan. He said, with something quite like a sneer, that he had much sharper eyes than any member of the Badger family that ever lived, and that he was quicker than a hundred Badgers put together. And as if he hadn't given reasons enough for disagreeing with Benny, he declared that he simply couldn't do any digging that night because he had a sore paw.

To prove his statement, Mr. Coyote held up one of his paws for Benny to see.

Benny looked at it. He couldn't discover that it was any different from Mr. Coyote's three remaining

paws. And he had just started to say so, too, when Mr. Coyote interrupted him with an enormous yawn.

"I'm getting sleepy," Mr. Coyote remarked. "It will be daylight before we know it. And I'm going home to take a nap."

So saying, he sprang up and stretched himself. And then he trotted off. But he stopped before he had gone far and looked back at Benny Badger.

"I'll be on hand to help you again after sunset," he said.

X
THE SORE PAW

Sure enough! Just as Mr. Coyote had promised, he was on hand the next night to "help" Benny Badger catch Ground Squirrels.

Benny regarded Mr. Coyote somewhat coldly, as the two met in the moonlight.

"How's your sore paw?" he asked Mr. Coyote.

Now, Mr. Coyote had just come trotting up without the least sign of lameness. But all at once he began to limp.

"My poor paw's no better," he told Benny, as a look of pain crossed his face.

"Let me see it!" Benny said.

And Mr. Coyote promptly held out one of his paws.

Benny Badger snorted. He seemed quite disgusted.

"This is not the same paw you showed me last night," he cried.

"My mistake!" said Mr. Coyote easily. And he pulled back that paw and thrust forth another.
Benny Badger bent over it for a moment.

"It looks all right," he grumbled.

"I can't help that," Mr. Coyote snarled. "It couldn't hurt me any more, no matter what happened to it."

To Mr. Coyote's surprise, Benny Badger seized his paw in his powerful jaws and held it in a viselike grip.

"Ouch!" Mr. Coyote wailed, pulling back quickly —a move which only caused him greater pain.

"Your paw doesn't feel any worse, does it?" Benny Badger asked him as well as he could, with his mouth so full.

"Yes, it does!" Mr. Coyote howled.

"Then you must have been mistaken when you said what you did only a moment ago," Benny told him.

"I must have been," Mr. Coyote admitted.... "Let me go!" he begged.

But Benny Badger's jaws only closed tighter.

"I'll bite you if you don't stop that!" Mr. Coyote threatened.

"My skin is very, very tough," Benny said. "And I can hurt you much more than this if I want to."

Mr. Coyote believed what Benny told him. So he made no more threats, but began to whine piteously.

"If you'll let me go I'll do anything you say," he promised.

"Will you agree to keep away from me?" Benny Badger asked him.

"Yes! Yes!" Mr. Coyote cried. "I promise!"

"Good!" said Benny Badger. "I don't need your 'help,' as you call it, any longer. And if you ever come near me again when I'm hunting for Ground Squirrels, I'll——"

Benny Badger never finished what he was saying, because he let go of Mr. Coyote just then. And the moment Mr. Coyote felt himself free he leaped

away and tore off on three legs as if he were in a terrible hurry to get somewhere else.

"Much help I'd ever get from him!" Benny Badger grumbled to himself. "He's too lazy to dig. But he isn't too lazy to grab the Ground Squirrels that somebody else drives out for him."

Benny Seized Mr. Coyote's Paw

XI
BIRDS' EGGS

Though Benny Badger never cared much for foxes, he was willing, usually, to stop and talk with one of that family—provided he wasn't too busy digging to take the time for gossip.

There was one fox who often strolled about the neighborhood. And though Benny had many a chat with this gentleman, somehow Benny never learned much from him.

He was so sly that he let Benny do most of the talking, while he listened. And when he did say anything, he preferred to ask questions.

In time Benny Badger noticed that his chats with Mr. Fox were very one-sided. And he made up his mind at last that when he next met that crafty fellow

he would ask him plenty of questions. He would make him talk, or he would know the reason why.

It happened that early on the following morning, when he was hunting for Ground Squirrel's holes, he found himself face to face with Mr. Fox. And Benny noticed that Mr. Fox was himself looking with great interest at a fresh Ground Squirrel's hole. "Hullo!" Benny Badger exclaimed. "I hope you haven't come here after Ground Squirrels."

Mr. Fox looked much surprised.

"No, indeed!" he said. "I'm only hunting for birds' eggs."

"Birds' eggs!" Benny Badger repeated. "Have you found any?"

Mr. Fox squirmed a bit. He did not like to answer questions.

"Have you found any eggs?" Benny asked him again.

"A few!" Mr. Fox replied.

"Where?" Benny inquired.

"Oh, in different places," said Mr. Fox. And he began to talk about the weather—how dry it was, and how much the country needed rain.

But Benny Badger was not to be fooled so easily.

"You haven't really answered my question," Benny reminded Mr. Fox bluntly. "I asked you where you've been finding birds' eggs. And I'll thank you to tell me, sir."

Mr. Fox gave a slight start. Benny's tone was none too pleasant. And Mr. Fox certainly didn't want to quarrel with him.

"If you wish to know anything about birds' eggs, why don't you ask a Prairie Chicken?" he inquired. "She would know a great deal more about eggs than I do."

To Benny, that suggestion seemed quite worth while. There was no doubt that what Mr. Fox said was true. And Benny wondered why he hadn't thought of the plan himself.

"Your advice," he told Mr. Fox, "is so good that I'm going to start right now to look for a Prairie

Chicken. It's almost dawn now. And the Chickens will soon be getting up."

So Benny said good-by. And Mr. Fox tried to say good-by, too; but somehow he choked over the words, and began to cough so violently that Benny Badger was quite alarmed.

He waited anxiously until he saw that Mr. Fox was out of danger. And then he left him.

If he had looked back he might have seen his sly friend capering about in the gray light as if something amused him hugely. And no doubt Benny would have wondered what it could have been.

"Prairie Chickens!" Mr. Fox was chuckling. "Much they'll tell him about eggs!"

XII
THE PRAIRIE CHICKEN

After he left Mr. Fox, Benny Badger hurried here and there and everywhere in search of a prairie chicken.

He found one, after a time. But the lady wouldn't stop to talk with him. The moment she spied Benny she whirred into the air and flew off, though she certainly must have heard him calling to her.

But at last, just as red streaks began to shoot up in the eastern sky, Benny caught sight of a stately dame who was so busy catching grasshoppers for her breakfast that she hadn't noticed him.

He did not dare go too near her, for fear of scaring her. So he called to her in as gentle a tone as he could, saying, "Don't be alarmed, madam! I only want to ask you a question."

The prairie chicken stretched her neck as high as she was able, and looked all around.

"Here I am!" Benny sang out from a grassy hummock.

The startled lady saw that he was not near enough to be dangerous. So she asked him, with a proud air, what his question might be.

"I'm interested in birds' eggs," Benny explained. "Have you any, madam?"

The prairie chicken took a few steps towards him, in a very grand manner.

"Yes, indeed!" she answered. "I have a baker's dozen! They are the most beautiful eggs I've ever seen —though perhaps I shouldn't say so.... They're speckled with brownish specks," she continued.

"How interesting!" Benny Badger exclaimed. "I must have a look at those eggs. Where is your nest, madam?"

And just then the prairie chicken did a strange thing. Without a word of warning she sprang into the air and sailed away, leaving Benny Badger to gaze

after her, and wonder why she hadn't answered his question.

He soon made up his mind that he would find her nest, anyhow.

Now, since there wasn't a tree anywhere in the neighborhood, Benny felt quite sure that the lady's nest must be on the ground. And since he knew that all prairie chickens slept at night, he waited until dark before he began his search, for he wanted to find Mrs. Prairie Chicken at home when he called on her.

So when night came once more, Benny Badger left his den and went forth on his errand.

He had gone only a short distance when he met his old friend Mr. Fox, who had told him a little—and very little, too—about eggs. "Are you having any luck to-night?" Benny Badger inquired.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Fox asked him.

"Have you found any eggs?" Benny questioned. Mr. Fox said something that might have been either "Yes" or "No." Benny was not quite sure which it was. But since Mr. Fox shook his head, he decided that it must be "No."

"I think we're too late," Mr. Fox remarked. "The eggs must have all hatched by this time."

Benny Badger hastened to set Mr. Fox right.

"That can't be possible," he replied. "I met Mrs. Prairie Chicken this morning and she told me she had a baker's dozen of eggs in her nest."

"You must be mistaken about that," Mr. Fox assured him. "Where did you say her nest is?"

"I didn't say," Benny answered.

"No, of course not!" Mr. Fox corrected himself. "What I meant was, where did Mrs. Prairie Chicken say it is?"

"She didn't say," replied Benny Badger.

"That's unfortunate," Mr. Fox told him. "It would have saved us a good deal of trouble if she had explained where she lives."

Then he told Benny Badger to go home, and not to trouble himself any more. "I will hunt for the old lady's nest," Mr. Fox declared.

Benny Badger couldn't help thinking that Mr. Fox was a very kind person. And he went away feeling that it was very fine to have a friend like him.

But after a while he began to wonder if he wasn't mistaken; for he happened to remember that Mr. Fox hadn't said a single word about letting him know when he had found the nest with the thirteen eggs in it.

XIII
DON'T DO THAT!

Benny Badger turned in his tracks and went straight back to the place where he had left Mr. Fox. But Mr. Fox was nowhere to be seen.

So Benny began asking everybody he met if he had caught a glimpse of Mr. Fox that night. First he asked a white-footed deer mouse, who pointed behind him and said that he had just seen Mr. Fox "over there." Then Benny put his question to a frightened prairie dog, who claimed that he had noticed Mr. Fox "over there," as he pointed in a direction exactly opposite. And still another reported that he had noticed Mr. Fox in an entirely different place.

"That's odd!" Benny Badger said to himself. "How can he be in three places at once?" And since

he could not answer that question, he decided to look in none of those three directions, but to try a fourth, because he felt sure that none of the three could be the right one. And besides, if Mr. Fox had really been where he was said to have been seen, he was such a roving fellow that he would have moved on.

Well, where he looked next, Benny found Mr. Fox.

"What luck?" Benny asked that wily gentleman once more.

Mr. Fox replied somewhat stiffly that he had nothing to say.

"What's that on your mouth?" Benny Badger demanded suddenly.

Mr. Fox hastily rubbed his paw across his mouth.

"It can't be egg," he blurted.

"Egg!" Benny Badger shouted. "I hadn't mentioned egg! But now that you mention egg, perhaps that's it."

Mr. Fox looked most ill at ease. But he made no reply.

"What's that clinging to your shoulder?" asked Benny Badger abruptly.

"It can't be a feather," said Mr. Fox, nervously brushing off his shoulder as he spoke.

"A feather!" Benny Badger exclaimed. "I've said nothing about a feather! But now that you speak of it, Mr. Fox, perhaps that's it."

Mr. Fox looked very, very uncomfortable. And he murmured something about "having to be on his way."

"Wait a moment!" said Benny, as Mr. Fox turned aside. "What's that on the back of your neck?" Mr. Fox tried in vain to look at the back of his own neck.

"It can't be——" he began.

But before he could finish, Benny Badger interrupted him.

"Yes, it is!" he cried. "It's my teeth!"

And so saying, he seized Mr. Fox on the back of his neck and began to drag him over the grass.

It became clear, at once, that Mr. Fox did not enjoy the sport.

"Don't do that, friend!" he begged. "What are you trying to do, anyhow?"

"I'm trying to rub the egg off your mouth," Benny Badger explained.

"Please don't trouble yourself," said Mr. Fox.

Then Benny began to shake him.

"Don't do that, friend!" said Mr. Fox again. "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm only trying to shake the feather off you," Benny told him.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Mr. Fox. "If you'll take those teeth off my neck, that's all I'll ask of you."

"Not yet!" Benny Badger replied grimly. "You're a robber. And I'm going to teach you a lesson.... You will rob birds' nests, will you?"

To his great surprise, Mr. Fox began to laugh.

"Why, you'd rob them yourself if you weren't so clumsy!" he cried. "You're really no better than I am."

Benny Badger hadn't thought of that. And the idea surprised him so much that his mouth fell open. And of course Mr. Fox at once leaped aside and ran off.

XIV
A QUEER DISCOVERY

No one would ever have called Benny Badger a great traveller. He was altogether too heavy to roam far from home upon his short legs. So it often happened that he did not know all that went on in the neighborhood.

Of course, his watchful eyes took in almost everything that was in sight of his den. But as for what was taking place just beyond the next rise, that was an entirely different matter. Unless somebody chanced to stop and gossip with Benny, sometimes several days would pass before he knew what his Luckily, Benny Badger kept his ears open, when he was awake.

And often he kept them half-open when he lay half-asleep, stretched out in the grass not too far from his den, enjoying a sun-bath.

One day when he was sunning himself the sound of voices snatched him out of his drowsiness. And he kept quite still, to see what he could see, and hear what he could hear.

Soon three coyotes came sneaking through the grass, talking in hushed voices—a thing they seldom did. Benny could hardly believe his own ears, because he had supposed that if the coyote family spoke at all, they always howled.

But if the quietness of the coyotes surprised Benny, what they said astonished him a great deal more. For Benny Badger learned that the three cronies were headed for a prairie dog village just beyond the next rise.

That was most amazing news. Benny Badger hadn't known that there was a prairie dog village so near his den. And for a moment he was tempted to call to the coyotes and ask them if what they said was really true or if they were only fooling.

But he didn't think the three prowlers had seen him. So there seemed to be no reason for their saying what wasn't so.

Well, the moment they disappeared, Benny Badger jumped up and hurried into his den. He would have followed the coyotes, but he decided it would be better to wait. The prairie dogs would be too wary, with those coyotes in their village.

But later, after the coyotes had left—ah! then he would pay a visit to the village himself.

Towards evening Benny Badger crept out of his den and followed the trail of the three coyotes. And sure enough! when he reached the top of the rise he saw the mounds of the prairie dogs spread out before him.

Though he saw no prairie dogs, he noticed an owl sitting upon a heap of earth that had been tossed out around a hole.

Benny Badger strolled up to the owl.

"It's a fine evening!" said Benny.

The owl merely stared at him, round-eyed, and made no reply.

"I say, it's a fine evening!" Benny repeated in a louder tone.

"Very well!" the owl replied. "You may say it as often as you wish. I'm sure I have no objection.... But you don't need to come any nearer," he added.

Benny Badger stopped and squatted in the grass. He was glad to rest, for he was
—as has been said—no great traveller.

"Is anybody at home?" he asked presently.

"Somebody is," said the owl.

"Then I'll dig right in as soon as I get my breath," said Benny Badger, glancing at the hole.

"Do you want to see somebody?" the owl asked. "For if you do, there's no need of your doing any digging here."

"Why not?" Benny inquired.

"I'm somebody," the owl informed him. "I live here; and I'll be disgusted if you go to tearing my house to pieces."

XV
BENNY AND THE OWL

Benny Badger smiled at the owl. He thought he must be fooling.

"You're a joker, aren't you?" said Benny. "But I never should have thought it—you look so glum."

The owl seemed somewhat displeased.

"I've never made a joke yet," he declared, "though I've no doubt I could, if I should ever want to."

Benny Badger glanced from the owl to the hole, and then back again at the strange fellow.

"You don't mean to say you live here, in this hole?" Benny exclaimed.

"Certainly; I do," the owl replied sharply.

Benny Badger couldn't understand how that could be.

Mr. Owl greets Benny very coldly.

"But this is a prairie dog house," he protested.... "Where's the chap that built it? He must be around here somewhere."

"I don't know where he is, and I don't care where he is," the owl answered. "I drove him out of this house because I wanted to live here myself. And I didn't trouble myself to see where he went."

Benny Badger could hardly believe what the owl told him. But he noticed that the fellow had a sharp beak, and sharp claws too.

"I should think you played a joke on the prairie dog," he remarked at last.

"Should you?" said the owl. "If it was a joke, it wasn't nearly as big a one as I'll play on anybody that tries to drive me away from here.... I drove a snake away yesterday," he added. And he looked very thoughtfully at Benny Badger, as if he were picking out a soft place in which to sink his cruel beak.

"You needn't be so touchy," said Benny. "I'm not going to disturb you. I'm sure I shouldn't care to live in your house."

The owl was a peppery fellow. He grew angry at once.

"Why not?" he demanded. "What's the matter with my house?"

"I'll tell you," Benny replied. "It's a second-hand one. And that's bad enough. But it would be still worse if I took it away from you, because then it would be third-hand."

The owl looked daggers at him.

"You've insulted me!" he cried loudly, swelling himself up—or so it seemed.

"Have I?" Benny Badger inquired. "Don't mention it! I'm sure you're quite welcome." To tell the truth, he had not the least idea what the owl meant.

Naturally, Benny's words only made the owl angrier than ever. And he became actually rude.

"If I were you," he spluttered, "until I learned better manners I would dig a hole somewhere, crawl inside it, and pull it in after me."

Now, that was a new idea—for Benny Badger. And he liked it.

"What fun that would be!" he exclaimed. "Then when I wanted to go out I'd have to dig my way again!"

The owl gave a queer cry. And looking quite discouraged, he flew off and left Benny Badger sitting there in the grass.

XVI
SPOILING A GAME

Though the owl left him in such a rude fashion, Benny Badger wasted no time in thinking about what had just happened. There was something far more worth while that claimed his thoughts. For the prairie dog village still remained where it had been. And as Benny looked at it he found it highly interesting.

Even as he glanced at the doorway of the nearest house he caught sight of a small head with bulging eyes, which stared at him without blinking.

Benny moved nearer. And the head promptly vanished.

Then Benny Badger smiled all over his face.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Here's somebody else at home!" And he looked all around at a number of other

doorways. To his great delight he saw other eyes peeping at him.

"There's a lot of 'em at home!" Benny cried with great glee.

He never felt happier in all his life. Everything was exactly as he would have wished it. And he was just taking off his coat, and trying to decide where he would begin to dig, when something happened that made him look very peevish. And he slipped his coat on again, and lay flat in the grass.

A coyote had come bounding up at exactly the wrong time! And every one of the prairie dogs promptly pulled his head out of sight.

If he noticed Benny at all, the coyote must have thought him no more than a heap of dirt. Anyhow, he paid no heed to Benny, but went stalking through the village with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, looking sharply out of the corners of his eyes at the houses he passed.

There is no denying that Benny Badger was displeased. He wanted no sneaking coyote at hand to spoil his plans. And he was all ready to growl, when

something made him change his mind and close his mouth.

The coyote walked through the village and disappeared in the distance. And here and there heads soon began to appear in doorways.

But when Benny Badger stood up and drew nearer to them, they dropped down again.

The next moment a very angry lady rushed up and began scolding Benny Badger at the top of her voice. It was Mrs. Coyote. "Go away from this village!" she shrieked. "You're spoiling our hunting!"

"Whose hunting?" Benny Badger asked her.

"Mine and my husband's!" she snapped. "That was my husband that passed by here a few minutes ago. Of course we know the Prairie Dogs will all hide when they see him. But they're so silly that they're sure to bob up and stare at him after he has gone along. And then"—she said—"then's the time I dash up and grab them."

Mrs. Coyote paused and glared at Benny Badger. "You've spoiled my game," she said. "You

went and showed yourself. And when they saw you, the Prairie Dogs hid again."

Benny Badger looked at Mrs. Coyote pleasantly enough.

"Why don't you dig for them?" he asked.

But Mrs. Coyote didn't appear to care for that idea in the least. She threatened Benny Badger with dreadful things, if he didn't leave at once. And then she hurried on to find her husband.

Benny Badger was glad to see her go. He was not at all afraid either of Mr. or Mrs. Coyote—nor of both of them together. And though he had spoiled their game, he hardly thought that they would be able to spoil his.

XVII
THE PRAIRIE DOG VILLAGE

Having once found his way to the prairie dog village, Benny Badger often visited it.

And it is said, by those who know, that while he was there he always had a much pleasanter time than the villagers themselves.

So little did the prairie dogs enjoy Benny Badger's society that whenever one of them spied Benny nearing the settlement he never failed to jerk his tail up and down and call out the news.

At the sound of the alarm—a high-pitched chatter—every prairie dog who wasn't at home scurried for his hole as fast as he could scamper.

Benny Badger always had to smile when he saw the villagers tumbling through their doorways.

They couldn't have done anything that would have suited him better. Had there been a single one among the prairie dogs that wasn't a dunce he would have run away from his hole, outside the village, to hide somewhere until Benny Badger left the place.

But the prairie dogs were too stupid to think of such a trick. They knew no better than to rush into their houses—which was exactly what Benny Badger wanted them to do.

And if anything happened now and then to make matters specially unpleasant for the prairie dogs, it never troubled Benny Badger. He seemed to grow fatter and happier than ever as time passed.

But at last he heard a bit of news one day that made him feel quite glum.

A young deer mouse claimed to have overheard a rancher talking—the rancher that lived about a mile from Benny Badger's home. And the deer mouse reported that the man was going to get rid of the whole prairie dog family. "He says they eat too much grass, and dig too many holes," the deer mouse declared.

Though the news upset Benny, and quite took away his appetite, for a few moments, he began to cast about for a way to prevent such a sad affair. If you could have seen him with a worried look on his face, anxiously asking everybody he met to give him advice, you would have thought that he felt very, very sorry for the prairie dogs.

But such was not the case at all. Benny Badger was feeling sorry for himself; for he knew that if the rancher drove the villagers away he would miss them terribly. Benny had almost given up hope of finding a way to put an end to the rancher's plan when the deer mouse told him another bit of news.

"He's going to build a new fence out this way—the rancher is!" the deer mouse informed Benny. "It's coming this side of the Prairie Dog village. And that's why the rancher wants to get rid of the Prairie Dogs."

"How do you know this?" Benny Badger asked his small friend. "Have you been eavesdropping again?"

The deer mouse blushed. And since he made no reply, Benny Badger had to believe him.

Still, Benny could see no way out of his difficulty. And he went home at day-break feeling quite out of sorts.

But when he awoke, right in the middle of the day, a happy thought popped into his head.

He was so excited by it that he couldn't go to sleep again, though the sun was shining brightly.

XVIII
SAVING THE DAY

Benny Badger kept his bright idea to himself. But his neighbors knew that he must have thought of something, because he seemed so good-natured all at once.

"He has a secret," they told one another. But they couldn't find out what it was. Though they asked Benny Badger point blank what he intended to do, he refused to tell them. He only smiled, and looked very wise. And indeed he felt just as wise as he looked.

For a time a good many of his friends spied upon him. Hidden behind whatever was handy, they watched Benny Badger.

But they soon grew tired of that. So far as they could see, he did nothing but dig holes. And certainly

that was nothing new for him. So his friends went about their own affairs, leaving Benny to dig as many holes as he pleased.

Now, it pleased him to dig more holes, and bigger holes, than he had ever dug before. And he dug them all on the other side of the prairie dog village—on the side toward the rancher's home.

Benny seemed to have no fixed plan as to how he should dig the holes—whether in a straight row, or in a circle, or any other way. His one idea seemed to be to dig a plenty—to dig as many as anybody could possibly want for any purpose whatsoever.

Now and then some passer-by would stop and look at Benny for a few minutes, and snicker.

"Are you looking for buried gold?" Mr. Coyote asked him.

"What's the matter—have you been digging so fast that you can't stop?" Mr. Fox inquired.

Even the prairie dogs—timid as they were—ventured to jeer at Benny Badger and demanded whether he had gone crazy. But Benny Badger never paused to answer anybody. He smiled a good deal,

however, as if he knew something that nobody else suspected.

Every morning at dawn he went home to rest. And every evening at sunset he returned to the same place, just beyond the prairie dog village, to take up his work where he had left it.

The only remark Benny would make when anyone insisted on talking with him was that he couldn't waste his time gossiping, because he had to save the day.

That seemed a strange statement. No one knew exactly what Benny Badger meant by it. To be sure, he saved each day for sleeping—for he worked only at night. But it was just as true that he saved each night for working. So it was only natural that people should be puzzled.

To everybody's surprise, Benny stopped his work as suddenly as he had begun it. Exactly at midnight he paused, brushed the dirt off himself, and slipped into his coat, remarking that he thought he "had saved the day."

With a hungry look on his face he turned toward the prairie dog village. And there was a great scurrying then.

"You ought to thank me!" Benny Badger called to the prairie dogs as they dived into their holes. "I've saved the day! The rancher certainly won't try to get rid of you now."

XIX
PLEASANT PRAISE

Not one of the prairie dogs knew what Benny Badger meant when he cried that he "had saved the day."

Of course, they had heard that the rancher did not like their village, and that he wanted to get rid of it —and them. But they couldn't imagine how Benny Badger might be able to help them. Indeed, they rather liked the rancher better than Benny, anyhow. And as for thanking Benny, the only time they would ever feel like thanking him would be when he bade them good-by and left the neighborhood, to return no more.

But Benny Badger was quite unaware of all that. He complained that the prairie dogs weren't treating him well.

"They ought to send a committee to my house to thank me for what I've done for them," he grumbled. "No one around here seems to understand me. But the rancher certainly will. You'll see before long that he'll be after me, to tell me what he thinks of me."

For several days afterward Benny lost a good deal of sleep by staying outside his house while watching for the rancher to appear. And little by little, from things he said now and then, his neighbors learned his secret.

They discovered that Benny Badger had been digging holes for the posts of the new fence that the rancher was going to build!

"When he finds those holes already made, he won't be so foolish as to dig others," Benny explained.

"But you've gone and dug them on the wrong side of the Prairie Dog village!" somebody objected.

"Of course I have!" Benny retorted. "I did that on purpose. Don't you understand that when the rancher finds the holes he'll use them where they are? You don't suppose—do you?—that he'll be so silly as to move the holes?"

The objector—a somewhat youthful coyote—slunk away with a foolish simper. He saw that Benny Badger knew what he was talking about.

"Since the Prairie Dogs' village will lie outside the new fence, the rancher won't pay any more attention to it," Benny Badger said stoutly. "From this time on, the Prairie Dogs are quite safe—so far as the rancher is concerned....

And that's how I have saved the day."

Benny Badger's secret was out at last. And as fast as people learned it they stopped to tell him that they had known all the time that he had a fine plan of some sort, and that if there was anything they could do to help him they would be greatly obliged if he would "count on them."

Of course the work was all done. But perhaps Benny's neighbors hadn't stopped to think of that. Anyhow he had never known them to be so pleasant before. And he quite enjoyed their praise; for everyone told him that nobody had ever suspected that he was so clever.

It was lucky that Benny took the time when he did to listen to his neighbors' pleasant speeches. Unfortunately they soon came to a sudden end.

XX
THE RANCHER IS ANGRY

Benny Badger lay motionless, with his long hair parted along the middle of his back and flowing off his sides in such a fashion that a careless passer-by would not have noticed that it was anything more than dry grass.

For several days Benny had been watching for the rancher. And now, at last, he saw him coming, riding on a horse over the rolling plain.

There was another man with the rancher. And as soon as Benny caught the murmur of their voices he made ready to hear many pleasant remarks about himself. He was only waiting until the riders should discover the holes he had dug near the prairie dog village.

Nearer and nearer came the men. And Benny Badger crouched lower and lower.

They had passed him, and ridden a bit nearer the village, when the rancher suddenly pulled his horse to a stand.

"Ah!" Benny Badger exclaimed under his breath. "He sees the new post-holes that I've dug for him. And how pleased he'll be!"

It was true that the rancher had just noticed the holes for the first time. The moment he saw them he gave a great roar.

"A badger!" he shouted. "We'll have to trap him. I can't have him tearing my ranch up like this. These holes are the finest things in the world to break a critter's leg in."

Benny Badger could scarcely believe what his own ears told him. He thought there must be a mistake somewhere. And when the rancher declared that the badger that dug those holes was worse than a whole village of prairie dogs, Benny was tempted, for one wild moment, to dash up to the men and tell them exactly what he thought.

But he remembered, in time, what the rancher had just said about trapping him. And he never stirred until the two riders had moved along.

When they had ridden beyond the next rise Benny Badger made a rush for his hole. And there he stayed all the rest of that day.

He didn't quite know what to do. And a little later he felt more uncomfortable than ever when the rancher began to build his new fence around the prairie dog village, without using a single one of the post-holes that Benny had dug for him.

All Benny's neighbors noticed what was happening. And they no longer told Benny what a clever fellow he was. On the contrary, they laughed slyly, and said things to one another whenever Benny Badger came near them.

When he growled at them they always pretended to be surprised to see him, and asked him if he had "dug any post-holes lately."

But Benny Badger never answered that question. Every time he heard it he felt like moving away from the neighborhood. And when he came home

early one morning and found a trap right in his doorway he made up his mind then and there that matters had gone far enough.

He turned away. And without stopping to tell anybody what he intended to do, or where he was going—without even saying good-by—he stole away across the plains to hunt for a new home.

XXI
THE NEW HOME

When Benny Badger went wandering off to find a safer and pleasanter neighborhood in which to make a new home for himself, he had no idea at all as to where he should go. He only knew that he wanted to get a good, long distance away from the place where he had been living.

Wherever he decided to settle, it must be some spot where the ungrateful rancher wouldn't be likely to find him, and set a trap in his doorway again.

On and on Benny travelled, until at last he met a spry young chap—one of the deer mouse family—who stopped still and stared at Benny as if he would like to speak to him, but didn't quite dare to.

"Hullo!" said Benny Badger. "Do you live around here?"

The deer mouse answered politely with a nod, as if he would like to talk, if he weren't too shy.

"Do you find this an agreeable neighborhood?" Benny Badger inquired.

"Very!" the deer mouse replied in a thin, piping voice.

"Is there plenty of good water nearby?" Benny asked him.

"Yes, indeed!" the deer mouse exclaimed. "There's a water-hole right over there!" And he pointed over his shoulder, without taking his eyes off Benny Badger. He knew it was safer to keep a close watch of strangers.

Benny sat down. He had journeyed a long way and he was tired.

"I'll go and have a drink as soon as I'm rested," he said. "I'm glad there's good water here. This seems to be a pleasant place.... Are there any good Gophers and Prairie Dogs in the neighborhood?"

"Oh, yes!" the deer mouse answered. "But you needn't worry about them. They won't harm you if you

mind your own affairs. I've lived here a long time; and they haven't touched me."

"What about Owls?" Benny Badger wanted to know.

The deer mouse looked solemn all at once.

"There are a few," he admitted. "If you're thinking of settling here, you'll have to watch sharp for them. I've had several narrow escapes."

Benny Badger smiled.

"I'd like to see the Owl that could hurt me!" he cried. "And as for Gophers and Prairie Dogs, I like them.... This is the very place I've been looking for. And as soon as I have rested a little longer and had a drink of that good water I'm going to dig myself a den right where I'm sitting now."

The deer mouse pricked up his long ears at that. To the best of his belief, no badger had ever lived in the neighborhood before. And if the stranger was going to dig a hole, he intended to watch him while he worked.

"If you feel rested enough now, I'll show you the way to the water-hole," the deer mouse said presently. He was impatient for the fun to begin.

Benny Badger stood up.

"Lead on!" he commanded. "I'll follow." And then he yawned—for it was already long past his usual bedtime.

The deer mouse trembled slightly as he looked into Benny's great mouth. And he took care to keep well ahead of the stranger all the way to the water-hole, and back again, too. But he soon forgot his fear when Benny Badger began to dig the new den. The dirt flew in such showers as the deer mouse had never seen in all his life—except during a cyclone.

Benny had begun to dig—as he said he should—in the exact spot where he had sat and rested. But for one reason or another he soon changed his mind, and started to dig a different hole a short distance from the first one.

Soon he moved again. And after he had begun no less than five holes, only to leave each one unfinished, the deer mouse interrupted him with a sharp cry.

"Stop! Stop!" he begged Benny. "Please don't do that!"

Benny Badger paused and stared at him in amazement.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

The deer mouse was all a-flutter.

"Goodness me!" he exclaimed. "You'll have the whole neighborhood dug up if you're not careful!"

XXII
A BREAKFAST INVITATION

For a moment or two Benny Badger looked at the deer mouse without saying a word. He told himself that here was a country person who couldn't ever have travelled much, or he would have known better than to make such a remark.... Spoil the whole neighborhood indeed!... Benny's lip twisted up in something like a sneer.

"Don't you worry!" he snorted. "I don't believe you ever saw a first-class digger before. I'm not going to spoil the neighborhood. I'm improving it. I'm making a fine house here—probably the finest there is for miles around."

The deer mouse appeared ashamed. Of course he didn't like to seem stupid.

"But why do you dig in so many places?" he faltered.

"That's my way," Benny Badger told him. "As soon as I get one den well started I think I'd rather live somewhere else. But I don't mind beginning again because there's no better exercise than digging."

"No doubt!" the deer mouse agreed. "But I'm sure it would be much too violent for me."

He said no more, but looked on with a puzzled air until at last Benny Badger had actually dug in one place long enough to make a deep den.

When it was quite finished Benny Badger brushed the dirt off himself and turned to Mr. Deer Mouse.

"Come inside and see if my new house isn't the finest one you ever saw!" he said.

For some reason Mr. Deer Mouse did not seem eager to enter. To be sure, he thanked Benny for the invitation, but he backed away a few steps and said that he thought he'd better not look at the new house that morning. "I—I haven't the time to spare," he mumbled.

Benny Badger couldn't understand that remark. The white-footed gentleman had had plenty of time to spend while watching him dig the den. And Benny said as much, too.

"That's exactly the point," said the deer mouse.

"I've spent so much time already that I've used it all up."

Well, Benny Badger couldn't understand that either.

"Used up all the time!" he cried scornfully. "Isn't there plenty more where the other time came from?"

"Oh, to be sure—to be sure!" said the deer mouse, who seemed ready to agree to anything—except to Benny's invitation. "But there is another reason why I mustn't visit your new home this morning: I'm hungry. I haven't had my breakfast yet."

Suddenly Benny Badger remembered that he was hungry himself.

And as he stared at plump Mr. Deer Mouse a certain idea came into his head. And he looked Mr. Deer up and down before he spoke.

"I haven't had my breakfast either," he said at last. "I'm ready for a good meal. Come right in and join me!"

But something made Mr. Deer Mouse say, "No, thank you!" Joining a badger at breakfast! Somehow that had a dangerous sound.

XXIII
MR. DEER MOUSE IS TIMID

Benny Badger began to lose patience with the deer mouse. He was one of the most timid persons Benny had ever seen. And Benny was on the point of telling him that he hadn't even the courage of a prairie dog.

But suddenly a new idea flashed into his head. He thought he knew what was troubling Mr. Deer Mouse.

"When I asked you to join me at breakfast I didn't mean what you thought I did," Benny announced. "You thought—didn't you?—that I meant to breakfast on you."

Mr. Deer Mouse admitted faintly that he had had some such notion.

"How ridiculous!" Benny Badger cried. "Why, you're so quick that I could chase you all day—and all night, too—without catching you. You're too spry for me. So we might as well put such an idea out of our minds."

Benny Badger sighed as he spoke. And he couldn't help noticing, once more, how very, very plump Mr. Deer Mouse was.

"What I meant by your joining me at a good meal was simply this," he continued: "If you'll only stay with me, and follow me quietly wherever I go, there's a good chance that you'll have a bone to gnaw before a great while."

All that seemed very pleasant to the deer mouse.

"Thank you ever so much!" he murmured. "I'll be glad to accept your invitation, so long as we aren't going to breakfast inside your new home."

So they set out. And for a time Mr. Deer Mouse followed Benny Badger all around the neighborhood.

Though Benny kept a sharp watch on all sides, he couldn't see anything—or anybody—that promised a meal. And he decided at last that he would have to make a change of some sort in his plans.

So he sat down and beckoned to Mr. Deer Mouse to move nearer.

"You go ahead of me, and I'll follow you," he said. "You're smaller than I am, and perhaps you won't frighten the game the way I do."

Mr. Deer Mouse did not seem to care for the suggestion.

"You might make a mistake," he objected. "If I went ahead of you, you might think that I was the game. And there might be a terrible accident."

Benny Badger sniffed.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "If I did make such a mistake, I promise you that I wouldn't let it happen more than once."

But the deer mouse proved to be a stubborn chap. He declined flatly to do as Benny wanted.

"Very well!" said Benny Badger gruffly. "I'm sorry that you don't care to make things as pleasant as possible for a newcomer. Where I used to live, people couldn't do enough for me."

"I believe you," Mr. Deer Mouse retorted. "In fact, I've heard that a man even set a trap for you, right in your own doorway."

Of course, that news came to Benny Badger as a great surprise. He had had no idea that Mr. Deer Mouse knew anything about him.

"Somebody has been gossiping!" Benny Badger growled angrily. "Who told you that?"

"Goodness me! Everybody has heard about it," Mr. Deer Mouse replied. "Don't you know that news travels fast over the plains?"

"Does it travel as fast as I do?" Benny Badger asked him suddenly.

Before the words were out of his mouth he leaped at Mr. Deer Mouse. And for one as heavy as he was, Benny leaped with surprising swiftness.

But quick as he was, he was too slow to catch Mr. Deer Mouse napping. That nimble fellow seemed to melt away right beneath Benny Badger's paws.
For one moment Benny was sure he had him. And the next moment he was sure he hadn't.

He couldn't see his small neighbor any where. In fact, it was a whole week before Benny Badger set his eyes on him again. And to Benny's amazement, Mr. Deer Mouse was just as polite as ever. He asked Benny how he liked his new home, and if he had found the people in the neighborhood as pleasant as he had expected.

"My house is a fine one," Benny told him. "And I dare say the neighborhood is as good as I could expect. Certainly there's a plenty of Gophers and Prairie Dogs here."

"I suppose"—said Mr. Deer Mouse—"I suppose some of them join you at breakfast every morning."

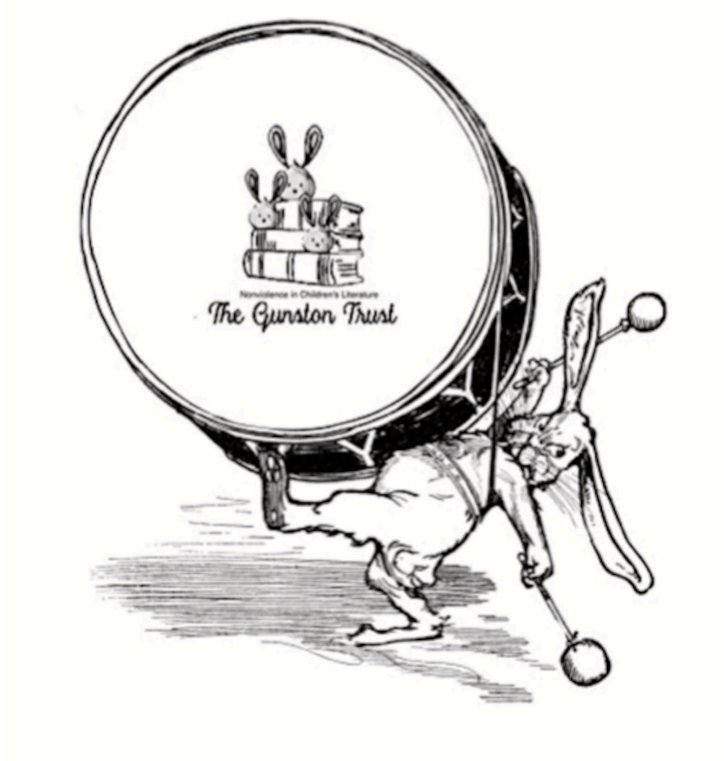
Benny Badger looked at him sharply. He was all ready to get angry. But Mr. Deer Mouse was so polite, and seemed so respectful, that Benny was ashamed to lose his temper.

He actually winked at Mr. Deer Mouse. And he felt more cheerful than he had since the rancher spoke ill of him.

"I'm glad I moved," he told Mr. Deer Mouse. "This is a fine place. I'm going to live here the rest of my life."

And he did.

THE END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